

By Felicia Sonmez

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A plan that would have Republicans and Democrats sit side-by-side during this month's State of the Union address has picked up support from nearly one-fifth of the Senate as well as a handful of House members, including a top House Republican.

Seventeen senators have co-signed a letter drafted by Sen. Mark Udall (D-Colo.) to congressional leaders urging them to back the idea of members of both parties sitting next to each other rather than at opposite ends of the House chamber during President Obama's Jan. 25 address.

Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski announced Friday that she is a "co-leader" of the letter. In addition to the 17 senators co-signing Udall's letter to leadership, Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), the third-ranking Senate Democrat, has also come out in favor of the plan.

Among the 17 senators co-signing Udall's letter are five Republicans -- Murkowski and Sens. John McCain (Ariz.), Olympia Snowe (Maine), Susan Collins (Maine) and Kelly Ayotte (N.H.) -- and 11 Democrats -- Sens. Jeanne Shaheen (N.H.), Ron Wyden (Ore.), Mark Begich (Alaska), Barbara Boxer (Calif.), Claire McCaskill (Mo.), Ben Nelson (Neb.), Mary Landrieu (La.), Jack Reed (R.I.), Kirsten Gillibrand (N.Y.), Sheldon Whitehouse (R.I.) and Amy Klobuchar (Minn.). Connecticut Independent Sen. Joe Lieberman has also signed on.

The proposal has also picked up the support of eight House members, including House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) and House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.). McCarthy, the third-ranking House Republican, told reporters at a media briefing Friday morning at the House GOP's annual retreat in Baltimore that he planned to sit next to Hoyer during the president's address. Hoyer, the number-two House Democrat, came out in favor of the bipartisan seating plan Thursday.

Six House Democrats have signed onto the Udall letter, including Reps. Mike Michaud (Maine), Heath Shuler (N.C.), Mike Ross (Ark.), Jim Matheson (Utah), Chellie Pingree (Maine) and

Sanford Bishop (Ga.). All but Pingree are conservative Blue Dog Democrats who voted for someone other than House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) for speaker last week. McCarthy and Hoyer have not co-signed because they are members of leadership.

The bipartisan seating plan was originally proposed by the centrist Democratic group Third Way in a letter to congressional leaders this week.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) said Thursday that the proposal deserves "serious consideration" and noted that he had spoken with Hoyer and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) about the plan.

Other congressional leaders, including House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio), House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.), Pelosi and McConnell have yet to weigh in on the seating issue. Asked Friday about the speaker's plans, Boehner spokesperson Michael Steel noted that "members can sit where they choose during the State of the Union."